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Nixon's Fringe Benefits

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WASHINGTON—One optimistic theory about the Watergate scandals was that they would lead to a little more candor in the conduct of the public business, but the lying, chiseling and deceiving still go on.

The latest outrage is the concealed costs of fixing up President Nixon's houses at San Clemente, Calif., and Key Biscayne, Fla.

When questions were raised about this a month ago, the White House said that the Government had put \$39,525 into the San Clemente spread for security purposes. Now the General Services Administration, which maintains Government buildings and purchases Government supplies, says it spent \$703,367 on "improvements" at the San Clemente house, and \$579,907 for improvements on the Key Biscayne place.

Obviously much of this was justifiable expense since Presidents need more security than other people, but the final audit by the G.S.A. includes \$76,000 for landscaping and a sprinkler system on the San Clemente grounds, \$3,200 for tiling a roof, \$13,500 for new heaters, \$2,800 for a pool heater, \$2,400 for a septic tank, \$6,400 for a beach cabana and \$184,174 for electrical work.

The stories about how Mr. Nixon acquired these houses in the first place are a little odd, but however they were financed, with the help of his friends, that is his own business. Fixing them up at a cost of \$1,300,000 in public funds is another matter.

You would imagine that the President noticed all the new landscaping and sprinkler systems and the new furniture and beach cabana and all that and that he would provide some answers to the charges of payola, but the White House merely refers all questions to the Secret Service, which takes responsibility for many expenditures but not for many others.

Many of the costs are easy to justify, such as \$42,293 for a "security lighting system" at Key Biscayne, \$340,000 for a helicopter landing pad built by the Army Corps of Engineers and \$128,708 for bullet-proof windows at Key Biscayne. The prices seem a little steep, but again this is Government business. The trouble is that nobody even tries to justify many costs that are obviously personal.

It is surprising that the President has not dealt promptly and sharply with this affair, particularly after the Watergate disasters. The one thing that has never been charged against him is personal greed or impropriety.

His family has been a model of respectability. His gang at the re-election committee, on the basis of the record so far, didn't steal money, merely freedom. They may have extorted money, but they didn't benefit personally from it.

Now, as if he didn't have enough trouble, the President is slipping into more controversy over public payment for private gain. This is the sort of thing that was ridiculous even when "Paving Block" Ed Flynn had the boys fix up his driveway, but for the President to tolerate this cheap nonsense—and not to clear it up—is almost as silly and clumsy as the Watergate itself.

Even Mr. Nixon has conceded publicly that maybe he created an "atmosphere" in the White House that contributed to the Watergate mistakes. But the new disclosures show that he has been allowing his staff to do things at public expense that he can obviously afford to do for himself and he has thus been creating an atmosphere that this sort of thing is permissible.

The chances are that all this was done by a zealous staff trying to please the Chief, but the main point, as in the Watergate affair, is that the White House is going through the same old routine, pretending there is no problem, referring all questions to somebody else, and thus inviting more and more doubts and investigations.

Aside from the moral ambiguities of this squalid period, the troubling thing is the lack of judgment in handling these political crises, and the irony of it is that this was supposed to be Mr. Nixon's strongest asset, about which he wrote his book "Six Crises."

Now, even in the midst of Watergate, the President is tolerating another avoidable problem. Nobody has charged him with ordering all these "improvements" at his private houses, but they are not the sort of thing a man would not notice, and the whole controversy could be removed merely by his asking for the bill and paying it.